



MY
VOICE
MATTERS
in research

My Voice Matters in Research

A Guide to Inclusive Mental Health Research
with Children and Young People

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for people who would want to undertake mental health research with children and young people, including young people themselves, youth workers, practitioners, educators, researchers, and organisations.

What does this guide cover?

This guide describes what young people say affects their willingness and ability to take part in mental health research. It focuses on ways to improve accessibility, trust, representation, culture, safety, communication, and the role of supportive environments.

Declaration

This research is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester (ARC-GM; NIHR200174). The views expressed are those of the authors and contributors, and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Recommended citation

Parry, S. & Gray, P. (2026). My Voice Matters in Research - A Guide to Inclusive Mental Health Research with Children and Young People. National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester (NIHR ARC-GM). Retrieved from: <https://arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk/my-voice-matters-in-research-2024-2026> [arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk].

The final version of this document was designed and formatted by Ashgan Mahyoub.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the young people who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights with us. Your contributions have been invaluable in shaping this guide and ensuring it reflects the voices that matter most. We are also grateful to the families, educators, and facilitators who supported the young people to take part.

Our sincere thanks go to the research team and Made by Mortals, whose dedication, expertise, and commitment to inclusive and ethical practice made this work possible. We would particularly like to thank Chris Brett and Gina Hazell from Made by Mortals, and Research Assistants Paula Galván Rodríguez (June 2024 - August 2025) and Ashgan Mahyoub (September 2025 - March 2026). We would also like to thank Dr Diana MacLeod and Dr Naomi Shenton for their voluntary support with data analysis and interpretation. Illustrations in this guide were designed by Emma Paxton of Imagistic and Ashgan Mahyoub. We would also like to thank everyone who has come to the My Voice Matters in Research consultation events between February 2024 and March 2026, as well as Ashgan Mahyoub and Beatrice Namuwaya for co-hosting these events with the research team.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the support of our partner organisations, schools, community groups, and especially the ARC-GM, whose collaboration and guidance have been essential in bringing this project to life.

Contents

Who is this guide for?	2
What does this guide cover?	2
Acknowledgements	3
Declaration	2
Contents	4
Introduction	5
Removing practical barriers	7
Top Tips.....	7
Practical Barrier Checklist.....	7
Recognising diversity	8
Top Tips.....	8
Cultural Sensitivity Prompts.....	8
Facilitation Balance Checklist.....	9
Cultural Barrier Checklist.....	10
Trust, clear communication, and emotional safety	11
Top Tips.....	12
Trust Building Actions.....	13
Trust Building Checklist.....	14
Privacy, identity and respectful engagement	15
Co-production, youth voice, and accessible research methods ...17	
Top Tips.....	17
Top Tips.....	20
Supportive research environments	21
Environment Suitability Checklist.....	21
Top Tips.....	22
Feedback and impact	24
Top Tips.....	25
Conclusion	26
Definitions for My Voice Matters in Research	29
Research Engagement.....	30
Co-Creation.....	30
Co-Design.....	31
Co-Production.....	31

Introduction

This guide introduces what young people think are the main barriers and factors that affect their involvement in mental health research. The content of this guide was co-produced through a 2-year consultation with stakeholders and a series of participatory workshops with young people from diverse and often under-represented backgrounds. The recommendations within this guide come directly from what young people told us about their experiences, needs, and hopes for mental health research.

We know that the voices of children and young people are not as present in the mental health literature and evidence base as we would like. This guide, and the related outputs from the My Voice Matters in Research project, aim to make mental health research more accessible for all children and young people, so the evidence base that informs mental health support and services is more representative of all communities of children and young people.

The guide explains how different parts of a young person's identity and life experiences can influence their participation in mental health research. This includes factors such as race, cultural background, gender, neurodiversity, and personal history. These themes are brought to life through three fictional characters - Sam, Amina and Jay. These characters, created based on the words and views of the young people involved in the co-production workshops, bring the intersectional identities and voices of young people into this guide.





Between July and November 2025, we ran four co-production workshops with young people identifying as Global Majority, autistic, LGBTQIA+, and/or with experience of the youth justice system.

Across all the co-production workshops, young people contributed through discussion, creative exercises, and visual storytelling. They created characters, mapped experiences, and built 'Trees of Reform' to show what inclusive mental health research should look like. Their voices shape every recommendation in this guide, from practical steps

like transport and timing, to deeper principles of trust, representation, and shared power.

This guide is not just about research design, it is about honouring young people's expertise and embedding their ideas into practice. The aim of the guide is to help people understand what children and young people need to take part meaningfully and comfortably in mental health research. It gives practical suggestions for reducing barriers, building trust, improving accessibility, and creating more inclusive research environments.

Removing practical barriers

Young people emphasise the importance of accessibility. Practical barriers such as limited money, time, travel, technology, and household responsibilities may hinder their ability to get involved.

Top Tips

Pay attention to structural barriers

- Ask simple, practical questions such as “What would make it easier for you to attend?” to identify hidden barriers.
- Offer travel support, food, and online options when travel or household responsibilities make in person sessions difficult.
- Choose accessible locations near public transport or within communities where young people already spend time.
- Be flexible with times and dates, recognising that some young people have caring roles or unpredictable home situations.
- Work with local community groups who already understand the challenges faced by families in the area.
- Avoid making assumptions about what young people can afford or access; instead, ask what would be most helpful.

Practical Barrier Checklist

Practical considerations

- Can the young person get to the location easily.
- Are transport costs covered.
- Is the time suitable for the young person and their family.
- Are sessions short enough and flexible.
- Are breaks allowed whenever needed.

Recognising diversity

Young people come from many backgrounds. Confidence, age, past experience, and social dynamics influence how easily they can take part.

Top Tips

Be sensitive to personal backgrounds and past experiences

- Ask young people what helps them feel comfortable, rather than assuming.
- Give space for anyone who seems nervous or unsure, without drawing attention to it.
- Avoid asking for personal details unless they are essential.
- Pay attention to signs of discomfort, such as silence, fidgeting or withdrawal, and offer breaks when needed.
- Remember that some young people may have had difficult experiences with adults in professional roles or services, so patience and respect are important

Recognition and representation play an important role in supporting inclusion, as young people are more likely to engage when they see their identities and experiences reflected and respected.

Cultural Sensitivity Prompts

Prompts to help reflect on cultural awareness during planning and delivery.

Understanding context

- How might cultural beliefs or family expectations affect participation.
- Could talking about mental health feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar.
- Are there community experiences that might influence trust.

Representation

- Do materials reflect a range of identities and backgrounds.
- Are examples relevant to the communities involved.

Communication

- Is the language respectful and free from assumptions.
- Are interpreters or translated materials needed.

Engagement approach

- Have trusted community members or groups been included.
- Is the method meaningful rather than tokenistic.

Skilled facilitation is essential to ensure that all young people have fair opportunities to take part and be heard.

Facilitation Balance Checklist

Use this checklist to help create balanced and fair group sessions.

Group dynamics

- Are quieter or younger participants invited in gently.
- Do confident voices avoid dominating.
- Is there space for everyone to contribute in their own way.

Communication style

- Is the facilitator using clear and neutral language.
- Are questions short and easy to understand.
- Is the facilitator checking for understanding without pressure.

Participation options

- Are different ways of joining in offered (speaking, writing, drawing, activities).
- Are young people allowed to contribute at their own pace.
- Is it acceptable for someone to observe first before speaking.

Emotional awareness

- Does the facilitator notice signs of discomfort or overwhelm.
- Can the group pause if needed.
- Are feelings and reactions handled sensitively.

If cultural barriers are not addressed, many young people are unable and/or unwilling to take part. Removing barriers is therefore essential to ensure that young people feel valued, respected, understood, and thus able to participate more fully.

Cultural Barrier Checklist

Communication needs

- Are documents written in simple, clear language.
- Are alternative formats available (e.g., large print, visual guides, pictures).
- Are explanations free from complex or confusing terms.
- Can young people ask questions at any time.

Support needs

- Can a trusted adult, friend or family member attend.
- Are sensory needs recognised (lighting, noise, seating, smells).

- Are comfort items, movement or quiet time allowed.

Cultural and personal factors

- Are cultural expectations and family circumstances considered.
- Is privacy fully protected.
- Are young people given enough time to decide whether to take part.

Inclusion and respect for diversity

- Does the research reflect diverse cultural identities.
- Are examples and visuals inclusive (race, religion, LGBTQIA+).
- Have intersectional factors been considered.
- Are facilitators briefed to avoid stereotypes.
- Is language respectful, accessible, and age-appropriate.

Trust, clear communication, and emotional safety

- Young people explain that a trusting relationship makes it easier to share experiences. This is especially important for those with difficult and/or disrupted past experiences. Cultural awareness helps to build trust by showing understanding of different backgrounds and values.
- Trust develops when communication is clear, open and consistent. Feeling safe and having privacy respected are essential for young people to engage honestly. When young people understand what will happen and what is expected of them, they are more likely to feel comfortable and take part.
- Emotional factors such as worries about judgement, shame, misunderstanding, and being excluded can limit participation.

Top Tips

Build rapport at a pace that feels comfortable

- Start with everyday conversation rather than jumping straight into personal topics.
- Ask simple, open questions to break the ice.
- Give young people time to settle before asking anything too direct or research related.
- Notice body language and allow space if someone seems unsure or overwhelmed.
- Let young people choose how they take part, such as talking, drawing, writing or observing first.

Provide private or anonymous ways to take part if needed

- Offer options such as one-to-one sessions, small groups or online participation.
- Allow young people to use initials or nicknames if this helps them feel safer.
- Choose locations that reduce the chance of being recognised by others, where appropriate.
- Make sure young people know who will see their contributions and how contributions or data will be used.
- Avoid asking for personal details that are not necessary.

Give clear explanations of the purpose of the research

- Describe the project in simple, direct language.
- Explain what the session will include and how long it will last.
- Be honest about what you know and what you are still deciding.

- Check for understanding by asking, “Does this make sense so far?”, or “Do you have any questions for me at this stage?”, or “Shall we run through next steps [again]?”, rather than “Do you understand?”.
- Share short, written or visual summaries so young people can refer to them.

Recognise that cultural and family expectations may influence engagement

- Avoid making assumptions about what a young person can or cannot talk about.
- Offer different ways to express thoughts that do not require direct personal disclosure.
- Work with trusted community members or groups when appropriate.
- Be open to adjusting the approach based on the young person’s comfort level.
- Tune into what language and beliefs may be held in relation to mental health within the group.

Trust Building Actions

Actions that help young people feel safe, respected, and able to speak openly.

Before the session

- Share simple introductions and photos of adults involved.
- Explain what will happen in a clear and predictable way.
- Offer choice about who can attend with them.

During the session

- Start with informal conversation to ease tension.
- Allow young people to observe before taking part.
- Use a calm and steady pace.
- Respect comfort items, breaks and quiet time.

After the session

- Explain how their input will be used.
- Offer a short summary of what was discussed.
- Thank them for sharing their experiences.
- Keep communication open for future involvement.

Trust Building Checklist

Steps to create a safe and engaging space for young participants

- Send social stories, short bios, or photos of facilitators before sessions.
- Offer informal pre-meets (online or in-person).
- Begin with casual conversation and light humour.
- Share facilitator stories to reduce power imbalances.
- Reinforce choice and voluntary participation.
- Clearly explain session purpose and activities.
- Follow up after sessions with updates on how input will be used.

Privacy, identity and respectful engagement

Hi, I'm Jay.

I'm eighteen, from a mixed background, and I'm gay. I came out a couple of years ago, but I still get nervous in new settings when I do not know how people will react. This is one reason why joining mental health research can feel difficult. You do not want to step into a room and feel judged straight away.

When I joined a workshop, there were only two of us young people. At first, I thought it might feel awkward, but it was actually better. Small groups feel safer. You do not have to pretend. You can just focus on the conversation.

One thing adults do not always understand is that not every young person who is gay or questioning is in the same situation. Some are open. Some are not. Some worry about privacy or being recognised. Some come from families where talking about identity is complicated. So when people say they want to speak to young people like me, I hope they know we are all different.

What helped most was having a casual chat before the session. We spoke about everyday things like food and music. After that, the more serious questions felt easier. The location mattered too. If it had been far away or in a place where lots of people I know might see me, I probably would not have taken part.

For me, good research means respect, privacy and no assumptions. When adults treat us as individuals, it is easier to share what we really think.



Safety and predictability in research settings

Hi, I'm Sam.

I'm eleven and I go to a school with good support for children like me. I'm autistic and I get anxious in new places, especially when I do not know what will happen. I bring a small fidget cube or a soft keyring because they help keep me calm.

When I first heard about taking part in mental health research, I felt unsure. I imagined adults asking long questions that did not make sense to me. When that happens, everything feels confusing and I stop talking. What helped was receiving short introductions and pictures of the adults beforehand. They felt less like strangers, which made me less worried.

In group sessions, I like listening first. I need to decide if it feels safe. If the room is too bright or noisy, or if the seats are arranged so everyone looks at each other, I feel uncomfortable. I like being able to sit slightly to the side but still be included.

I enjoyed the creative activities most. When we made music together, there was no right or wrong. That made it easier to join in. I wish more research allowed young people to take breaks, move about or use comfort items without being judged. When adults understand these needs, it feels easier for me to speak.



Cultural sensitivity, trust, and communication

Hi, I'm Amina.

I'm fourteen and I'm British Pakistani. I'm usually quiet in groups even when I have something to say. I get nervous when people look at me, so sometimes it seems like I am not interested. I am thinking a lot, but I need time before I speak.

When I went to a research workshop, it helped that my cousin came with me. Being close to someone I know makes new places feel safer. I also liked that the room was not crowded. Busy rooms make me feel like I cannot breathe properly.

Something I wish adults knew is that, in some families, talking about feelings is not simple. You are not always used to being asked what you think, so sharing personal experiences can feel uncomfortable or even disrespectful. Research can feel like a big thing when you are unsure if people will understand your culture or your home life.

I liked an activity where we used drawings and stories instead of talking directly about ourselves. It felt safer that way. I think more young people like me would take part if researchers spent time in our communities or we worked with people we already trust. Feeling understood matters the most.



Co-production, youth voice, and accessible research methods

- Young people value opportunities to shape questions, methods, and ways of sharing findings. Participation improves when young people are treated as contributors.
- The use of creative, arts-based, or non-verbal methods can help young people to express themselves without pressure.

Top Tips

Offer different communication methods

- Ask each young person how they prefer to share their thoughts, and provide options such as speaking, writing, drawing or using digital tools.
- Allow young people to switch between methods at any point, depending on how they feel.
- Check the pace of the session to ensure there is enough time for those who need longer to express their ideas.

Focus on strengths

- Begin conversations by asking the young people what they enjoy, what they are proud of, or what they feel confident about.
- Notice moments when a young person shows insight, creativity or leadership, and acknowledge these positively.
- Frame questions in a way that highlights possibilities rather than problems, for example, “What works well for you?” instead of “What do you struggle with?”.
- Encourage activities that allow young people to use their personal interests or skills.
- Provide opportunities for success in small steps so young people can see their progress.

Invite peer-led elements where appropriate

- Ask young people if they would like to help shape part of the session, such as choosing an activity or leading a short discussion.
- Use paired or small group activities where young people can support one another.
- Encourage young people who feel comfortable to welcome others, explain activities, or model participation.
- Make sure peer leadership is voluntary and not placed on young people who are uncomfortable with it.
- Check in with the group to ensure peer-led activities feel fair and respectful for everyone.



Top Tips

Keep methods flexible rather than fixed

- Adapt session plans based on the energy and comfort level of the group.
- Allow young people to choose between different activities, such as talking, writing or creative expression.
- Give space for spontaneous ideas or changes, especially if young people suggest alternative ways to share their views.
- Be prepared to slow down or pause if the group needs more time.
- Review methods regularly with young people and ask what would make participation easier.

Use technology or online communication where it supports access

- Offer online options such as video calls, simple forms, or message-based contributions (e.g., Mentimeter or SnapChat) for those who find travel difficult.
- Check what platforms young people feel comfortable using and keep options straightforward.
- Provide clear instructions and short practice opportunities for anyone unfamiliar with online tools.
- Be mindful of digital access issues and offer alternatives if a young person does not have a device or stable internet connection.
- Keep online sessions short and include breaks where needed.

Consider incentives carefully, recognising that some may find them uncomfortable

- Ask young people what types of recognition feel appropriate, such as certificates, small vouchers, or simply a thank you.
- Avoid making incentives feel like payment for personal disclosure. Keep them linked to time and effort, not to what is shared.

- Offer a choice of incentives so young people can select what feels comfortable.
- Keep conversations about incentives private to avoid embarrassment or pressure.
- Explain clearly that taking part is voluntary and that incentives are a way of acknowledging time, not a requirement to take part.

Supportive research environments

The research setting shapes participation. Use warm, inviting, and youth friendly spaces, and ensure the environment supports privacy.

Environment Suitability Checklist

Check whether the space supports comfort, safety and inclusion.

Physical environment

- Is the space calm, warm and welcoming.
- Is there enough privacy.
- Is the noise level manageable.
- Is the lighting comfortable (no harsh brightness).
- Are seats arranged in a way that do not make young people feel observed.

Accessibility

- Can young people choose where to sit.
- Is there space to move around.
- Are sensory needs considered.
- Are toilets nearby and easy to find.

Setting type

- Is the location youth friendly rather than formal or clinical.
- Is it easy to reach by public transport.

- Is it easy to reach by public transport.
- Could the location create concerns about being seen or recognised.

Pay attention to how group dynamics affect participation. Skilled facilitation can help to create balance within groups. Young people engage more when they feel comfortable and respected.

Top Tips

Offer different communication methods

- Ask each young person how they prefer to share their thoughts, and provide options such as speaking, writing, drawing or using digital tools.
- Use activities that allow quiet participation, such as adding ideas to a board or using sticky notes.
- Provide visual supports, simple diagrams or prompts for young people who prefer non-verbal communication.
- Allow young people to switch between methods at any point, depending on how they feel.
- Check the pace of the session to ensure there is enough time for those who need longer to express their ideas.

Focus on strengths

- Begin conversations by asking the young people what they enjoy, what they are proud of, or what they feel confident about.
- Notice moments when a young person shows insight, creativity or leadership, and acknowledge these positively.
- Frame questions in a way that highlights possibilities rather than problems, for example, “What works well for you?” instead of “What do you struggle with?”

- Encourage activities that allow young people to use their personal interests or skills.
- Provide opportunities for success in small steps so young people can see their progress.

Invite peer-led elements where appropriate

- Ask young people if they would like to help shape part of the session, such as choosing an activity or leading a short discussion.
- Use paired or small group activities where young people can support one another.
- Encourage young people who feel comfortable to welcome others, explain activities, or model participation.
- Make sure peer leadership is voluntary and not placed on young people who are uncomfortable with it.
- Check in with the group to ensure peer-led activities feel fair and respectful for everyone.

Top Tips

Keep methods flexible rather than fixed

- Adapt session plans based on the energy and comfort level of the group.
- Allow young people to choose between different activities, such as talking, writing or creative expression.
- Give space for spontaneous ideas or changes, especially if young people suggest alternative ways to share their views.
- Be prepared to slow down or pause if the group needs more time.
- Review methods regularly with young people and ask what would make participation easier.

Use technology or online communication where it supports access

- Offer online options such as video calls, simple forms, or message-based contributions (e.g., Mentimeter or SnapChat) for those who find travel difficult.
- Check what platforms young people feel comfortable using and keep options straightforward.
- Provide clear instructions and short practice opportunities for anyone unfamiliar with online tools.
- Be mindful of digital access issues and offer alternatives if a young person does not have a device or stable internet connection.
- Keep online sessions short and include breaks where needed.

Consider incentives carefully, recognising that some may find them uncomfortable

- Ask young people what types of recognition feel appropriate, such as certificates, small vouchers, or simply a thank you.
- Avoid making incentives feel like payment for personal disclosure. Keep them linked to time and effort, not to what is shared.
- Offer a choice of incentives so young people can select what feels comfortable.
- Keep conversations about incentives private to avoid embarrassment or pressure.
- Explain clearly that taking part is voluntary and that incentives are a way of acknowledging time, not a requirement to take part.

Feedback and impact

Maintain open and respectful communication and clearly explain how any inputs from young people have shaped the research. It is crucial to recognise the importance of personal and cultural experiences in understanding findings.

Top Tips

Show young people how their involvement has influenced the research

- Keep a record of suggestions, ideas, or feedback provided by young people, to ensure that their contributions are documented.
- Give specific examples of how their input shaped the research design, methods, and/or outputs. For example, “Thanks to your ideas, we changed the way we ask questions in our survey.”
- Organise short sessions to discuss any changes that were made based on their input and ask for their reflections.
- Acknowledge their contributions in reports, presentations, and/or publications where appropriate.
- Encourage young people to think about the difference their involvement makes and how it benefits the research and/or the wider community.

Be open about decisions and next steps

- Use plain, age-appropriate language, and avoid jargon or overly technical terms. Explain research stages and decisions in ways that young people can understand.
- Use visual timelines and flowcharts to show what has happened so far, what is happening now, and what comes next. Visual aids make abstract processes concrete.
- Share progress updates frequently (e.g., via email, newsletters, or meetings) so young people feel informed rather than left out.
- Don't just tell young people what decisions were made - explain why those decisions were taken and what factors influenced them.
- Encourage young people to ask questions about decisions and express concerns. Always respond openly and honestly.

Conclusion

This guide has shown that taking part in mental health research is shaped by many different factors in a young person's life. Practical barriers such as travel, money, time and language can make participation difficult. Emotional and cultural factors, including trust, privacy, stigma and past experiences, also influence how safe and comfortable children and young people feel. Children and young people told us that feeling understood, represented and respected matters just as much as the research activity itself.

The examples shared remind us that children and young people are not a single group. Their identities, backgrounds, and needs vary widely. A flexible, thoughtful approach is essential. When adults create predictable, welcoming environments, use clear communication, and work with trusted people and communities, participation becomes more accessible.

Understanding these barriers and helpful factors is the first step towards more inclusive research. This guide encourages all practitioners, community groups and researchers to reflect on their own practice and to make changes that support meaningful involvement. By doing so, we can help ensure that mental health research includes the voices and experiences of children and young people who are often overlooked, leading to work that is more honest, relevant and useful.

Sam's concluding thoughts

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide. I hope it has helped you understand that taking part in research can feel worrying for some young people, especially when things are unexpected, noisy or confusing. Small changes, like explaining what will happen, allowing breaks, or letting people join in at their own pace, can make a big difference.

When adults listen, plan carefully and stay flexible, it helps young people like me feel calmer and more confident. That makes it easier to share ideas and be part of something important.

I hope you take what you have learned and use it to make research feel safer and more comfortable. When young people are included in ways that work for them, the services that are created are more likely to meet real needs.



Jay's concluding thoughts

Thanks for spending time with this guide. One of the most important messages I hope you take away is that young people are not all the same. Privacy, identity, safety and trust can affect whether someone feels able to take part in research at all. Making space for choice and avoiding assumptions really matters.

Good research feels respectful. It gives people control over how much they share, where they go and who they are with. When that happens, conversations are more honest and useful.

I hope you use what you have learned here to create research that genuinely includes young people from different backgrounds and experiences. When services are developed with young people, rather than for them, they are far more likely to be relevant, fair and fit for purpose.



Amina's concluding thoughts

Thank you for reading and thinking about how young people experience research. I hope this guide has shown that engagement is not just about inviting young people to take part, but about understanding where they come from and what might make participation feel difficult. Culture, family expectations, confidence and trust all matter.

When research feels respectful and thoughtful, young people are more likely to feel able to join in, even if they are quiet or unsure at first. Working with communities and creating safe ways to share ideas helps people feel understood.



I wish you well as you take this work forward. By listening carefully and adapting your approach, you can help make sure mental health research includes young people from all communities and leads to services that reflect their real lives.

Definitions for My Voice Matters in Research

These are three sources where you can find helpful definitions and information about co-production:

NHS (co-production in health services)

Co-production means working in equal partnership with people who use services, carers and communities from the very beginning of projects, including design and evaluation.

<https://www.sabp.nhs.uk/aboutus/members-and-governors/how-to-get-involved>

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

Co-production happens when people with lived experience have equal importance and influence as professionals in designing and delivering services or projects.

<https://www.scie.org.uk/what-is-co-production/>

Shaping Our Lives / Co-production Network

Co-production is when people, families, organisations and commissioners work together in an equal way, sharing power, skills and decision-making.

<https://shapingourlives.org.uk/report/definition-of-co-production/>



The following are definitions have been developed by the My Voice Matters in Research project team throughout the project specifically in relation to collaboration with children and young people in mental health research.

Research Engagement

Within My Voice Matters in Research, research engagement refers to how children, young people and families are informed about, invited into, supported to take part in, and experience participation in mental health research.

This includes ensuring that:

- Opportunities to take part are accessible, inclusive and relevant
- Practical, cultural and systemic barriers are reduced
- Young people feel safe, respected and able to share their views
- Participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic
- Contributors understand how their input makes a difference

Research engagement therefore focuses not only on whether children and young people take part, but how inclusive, supportive and empowering the experience of participation is.

Co-Creation

Within the project, co-creation describes collaborative processes where children, young people, families, researchers and professionals work together to explore experiences of mental health, identify priorities, and generate ideas for improving research and services.

Co-creation involves:

- Sharing perspectives and lived experiences
- Jointly identifying problems and potential solutions
- Iterative conversations across groups
- Valuing different forms of knowledge equally

Co-creation may occur at multiple stages of the project and supports the development of ideas that are grounded in real-world experiences of mental health support and services.

Co-Design

In My Voice Matters in Research, co-design refers to working in partnership with children, young people and families to design specific research approaches, tools, interventions or service improvements that aim to make mental health research and support more inclusive and accessible.

This includes:

- Designing participation methods and materials
- Developing engagement pathways
- Creating service or intervention models
- Testing and refining ideas together

Co-design ensures that what is developed reflects the needs, preferences and lived experiences of diverse children and young people.

Co-Production

Within the project, co-production is understood as an ongoing partnership approach in which children, young people, families, researchers and practitioners share power, responsibility and decision-making across the full research lifecycle.

Co-production includes:

- Involvement from project conception through to dissemination and implementation
- Shared leadership and influence over decisions
- Recognition of lived experience as expertise
- Transparency, reciprocity and mutual respect
- Sustained relationships rather than one-off consultation

Co-production represents the project's ambition to move beyond participation towards equitable collaboration that leads to meaningful change in mental health research and services.